

REVIEWS

Dramatic flaws cruelly exposed

LONDON is suddenly full of plays about the Second World War and the Nazis. The most distinguished of them is Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, with its resonant account of the wartime meeting between Werner Heisenberg, then in charge of the German nuclear programme, and his mentor Nils Bohr.

At the Almeida there is Klaus Maria Brandauer's icily compelling performance as that "good" Nazi Albert Speer in a gripping new play by Esther Vilar, and now comes this revival of CP Taylor's *Good*, unseen in London since it premiered at this address in 1981.

There is nothing more tedious than critics banging on about the great productions of the past, but *Good* — which made it on to the National Theatre's recent list of the 100 best plays of the century — has always stayed with me. Alan Howard gave an unforgettable performance as the literary academic Halder, a nervy, abstracted figure with a Jew as his best friend who drifts, gently but inexorably, into the welcoming arms of the Nazis, ending up as one of the architects of the Final Solution.

It struck me then as a profound, involving work that forces members of the audience to consider what their own reaction would have been had they found themselves in Germany in the Thirties. Are most of us complacent, pliable collaborators at heart?

Yet Michael Grandage's revival left me cool and unmoved. The play seems more sloppily written than it did — with the exception of Halder, and his Jewish friend Maurice, the characterisation is alarmingly one-dimensional, and when the play ends up at the gates of Auschwitz you get the uncomfortable feeling that the drama is merely hitching a ride on the Holocaust. Yes, *Good* creates a frisson of horror as the inmates appear in their striped uniforms, but I'm not convinced that Taylor actually has anything worthwhile to say about the unimaginable horror of the death camps.

For in this second-rate production the play's basic failure is glaringly exposed. Halder is initially recruited by the Nazis because he has written a novel about mercy killing, inspired by his mother's senile dementia. But the dramatist's suggestion

Theatre

Good

Donmar Warehouse

that Halder's drift into the practical organisation of mass extermination occurs without seriously disturbing his equanimity seems entirely unpersuasive. How much stronger the play would be if it let us into the mental compromises and the moments of agonised doubt and terror that would surely accompany such a journey into barbarism.

Howard was so endearing in his vulnerable vagueness that you somehow accepted Taylor's lack of insight. Charles Dance, however, an actor who often gives the impression that he thinks a handsome profile can make amends for a dull performance, is merely blandly unlikeable. As he leaves his inadequate wife for a young student admirer, shouts at his demented mother and abandons his Jewish friend to his fate, Dance totally fails to create the spell of complicity with the audience that can make the play so unsettling. Only his sudden, Conradian awareness of horror at the end achieves real impact.

Grandage's cold and empty production doesn't help. It's all stripped-down minimalism, with a modishly stark, grey-slate design by Christopher Oram and an alarming absence of either chills or passion. Even the play's most potent device, in which Halder imagines he hears bands playing in his head at moments of stress, is diminished, for here we get only recorded background music rather than the disconcerting on-stage band of the original production.

Jessica Turner is touching as Halder's wife, Ian Gelder's Maurice supplies some much-needed moments of raw emotion as the Nazi threat intensifies, and, as the girlfriend, Emilia Fox's sense of personal goodness amid the evil is more persuasive than Dance's. Nevertheless, this remains a deeply disappointing revival that leaves a once highly regarded play looking cruelly exposed.

Tickets: 0171 569 1732

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